

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
For the Montana National Register of Historic Places Program and State Antiquities Database

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
Montana Historical Society
PO Box 201202, 1410 8th Ave
Helena, MT 59620-1202

Property Address: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

Historic Address (if applicable): **Same**

City/Town: **Helena, MT**

Site Number: **24 LC 2197**

(An historic district number may also apply.)

County: **Lewis & Clark**

Historic Name: **Union Bank & Trust building**

Original Owner(s): **Union Bank & Trust**

Current Ownership ☒ Private ☐ Public

Current Property Name: **Wells Fargo**

Owner(s): **Norwest Bank Montana**

Owner Address: **PO Box 2609
Thomson Property Tax Service
Carlsbad, CA 92018-2609**

Phone:

Legal Location

PM: **Montana** Township: **10N** Range: **3W**

NE ¼ SW ¼ SW ¼ of Section: **30**

Lot(s): **Unknown**

Block(s): **411**

Addition: **Helena Townsite** Year of Addition: **1869**

USGS Quad Name: **Helena** Year: **1985**

Tax ID 05-1888-30-3-21-17-0000

Historic Use: **Bank**

Current Use: **Bank**

Construction Date: **1958** ☐ Estimated ☒ Actual

☒ Original Location ☐ Moved Date Moved:

UTM Reference www.nris.mt.gov/topofinder2

☐ NAD 27 ☒ NAD 83 (preferred)

Zone: **12** Easting: **420497** Northing: **5160146**

National Register of Historic Places

NRHP Listing Date:

Historic District:

NRHP Eligible: ☒ Yes ☐ No

Date of this document: **November 18, 2009**

Form Prepared by: **Diana J. Painter, PhD**

Address: **3518 N. C Street, Spokane, WA 99205**

Daytime Phone: **(707) 364-0697**

MT SHPO USE ONLY

Eligible for NRHP: ☒ yes ☐ no evaluated under C only

Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D not evaluated under A, B, or D

Date: 11/16/2010

Evaluator: Kate Hampton

Comments:

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Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

Site Number: **24 LC 2197**

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

X See Additional Information Page

Architectural Style: **Modern** If Other, specify: **Curtain wall**
Property Type: **Commercial** Specific Property Type: **Office**

Architect: Architectural Firm/City/State: **Orr Pickering and Associates, Billings, MT**
Builder/Contractor: **George Wattern** Company/City/State: **Lowe Construction Company, Helena & Billings, MT**
Source of Information: **Newspaper**

The Wells Fargo building (formerly Union Bank and Trust) at 350 N. Last Chance Gulch is a three-story building with a basement. It has a rectangular footprint and a flat roof with a mechanical penthouse in the northwest corner. The building is located on the east side of its lot and extends to the property line on E. Lawrence and N. Last Chance Gulch streets. The building faces onto N. Last Chance Gulch Street. To the rear of the building is a surface parking lot. The building is reinforced concrete construction with brick veneer and an aluminum and glass curtain wall. It has a concrete foundation and composition roof, according to building permit data. It is a Modern, curtain wall building constructed in 1958.

Massing and design. The overall building form for the Wells Fargo building is simple, comprising a rectangular block relieved only by a penthouse structure and a small indentation and slightly canted wall at the secondary entry on the north façade. All public facades are made up of a combination of glass and metal curtain wall and brick veneer. The south façade abuts the neighboring building and is, for the most part, not visible.

Front façade. The front façade is made up of five bays of glazing and metal panels separated by brick-clad pilasters. A sixth bay on the far north side of the façade is clad entirely in brick with no openings. The individual bays are made up of alternating rows of slightly tinted glass and aluminum panels in a metallic finish, set within a dark metal frame whose vertical mullions dominate the horizontal rails.

A wide, brick-clad band separates the lower level of the building from the upper two stories. Below, the recessed main entry to the building is slightly offset to the north on the front façade. It consists of a glass and anodized aluminum entry bays visually separated by a brick-clad pier located in alignment with the building face. To the immediate left (or south) of the entry is a panel intended for building signage. A bank of horizontally-oriented windows whose mullions are in alignment with the windows above, are located below the first, second and fifth bays (counting from the left or south) on the building frontage. Polished granite veneer extends to the sills in this location and continues along the building frontage and around to the building's north façade.

The recessed entry bay is 36' wide. The entry itself is made up of double doors with full-height glass flanked by one-over-one-light sidelights the same width as the doors, surmounted by a broad transom. Additional windows within the entry have one-over-one lights and the similar proportions as the other windows. Frames are anodized aluminum. The combination of the entry's deep recess, the dark framing, and a large canopy makes this entry minimally visible from a distance or from the sidewalk.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

North (side) façade. The north façade continues the design motifs of the front façade, with two bays of curtain wall above and separated from ganged, horizontally-oriented windows at the lower level by a wide, brick-clad band. Below is polished granite veneer. To the right of the curtain wall is a full-height wall of brick veneer that is set back from the face of this façade extends to the top of the penthouse, which rises about one story above the main roof of the building. A secondary entry is located at the ground level, consisting of a double door with full-height glass with a transom above. To the left of the door is a granite panel on which signage is mounted. The entry is covered by a large canopy. The brick wall in this location has a subtle scoring pattern that extends the full height of this bay.

Rear (west) façade. All details on the rear façade are flush with the building surface. Four curtain wall panels of 20 glass and metal panels make up each bay, which is separated by a brick-clad pilaster. The curtain wall covers only the second and third floors. The surface of the penthouse to the north, the first floor, and a wide expanse to the right or south on this wall is clad entirely in brick, with no surface detailing. Five horizontal louvered metal grills are located within the bay to the right. A flush metal door with a small single light is located below.

South façade. This façade abuts the neighboring building, and is only visible near the building parapet.

Materials and finishes. The materials on the building consist of brick veneer, polished granite veneer, and tinted glazing and dark aluminum panels set within the dark frame of the curtain wall. The brick has a combed surface (described as rose-gray tapestry brick in the newspaper account) and contrasts with the reflective and metallic surface of the curtain wall (described as gold-colored in the newspaper account). The alternating glass and metal panels of the curtain wall take on different appearances in different lights, but mostly appear dark in contrast to the brick. The granite panels, mostly black and pale brown or pink. The entire roof is finished with a plain metal coping.

Interiors. The back wall of the first floor displays a mural by famed Montana artist Rudy Autio. This mural was evidently a later addition, as the newspaper article written on the occasion of the building's construction mention a fabric-covered rear wall.

The article does mention that Union Bank's \$100,000 gold collection would be displayed. This collection was still in place as late as 2004, when an article in *The Independent Record* said it would be donated to area museums. There is, however, still an exhibit of gold on the first floor, as well as exhibits on the history of Union Bank and Wells Fargo in Helena.

Interior lobby details that appear to be intact from the construction of the building include the gray terrazzo floor with brass details and attractive wood and aluminum rail details.

Changes over time. A 1963 photograph shows the Union "Weatherball" extending from the top of the bank building on the north end, next to Penney's (see page 7).

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

According to the website "Helena as She Was, Images of Montana's Capital City," this feature was a "white translucent sphere which gave the latest weather forecast at night via colored-coded lights inside. The bank's often-played radio jingle gave the code, and permanently implanted [sic] itself in the brains of all Helenans:

Union Weatherball red as fire, the temperature is going higher.

Union Weatherball white as snow, down the temperature will go.

When the Weatherball is green, no change in temperature is foreseen.

Weatherball flashing night or day, rain or snow is on the way." (Source:

http://www.lifelikecharm.com/buildings_of_note.htm, November 18, 2009).

Research did not reveal when the weatherball was removed.

A remodel of the building took place in 1960; exact changes unknown. Changes were made to the lobby and offices when Northwestern Bank took over in 1975. These changes were designed by the Helena firm of Campeau & Crennen Architects. Minor changes in the early 1980s included sign changes, interior renovations, and new awnings. Interior renovations were undertaken over time to accommodate new office tenants. The renovation that occurred in 2000 for Wells Fargo was undertaken by Campeau, Karhu & Cullen, PC of Helena.

The large windows visible in the photograph on page 7 along the top of the south façade were filled in 2008 in order to meet building code requirements when the neighboring building added a second story (*City of Helena building permit files, November 2009*).

ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

Curtain wall construction was combined with masonry and with steel frame construction at mid-century to create what has been called the "quintessential symbol of post-World War II modern architecture" (*Prudon, 2008:107*). Curtain wall construction is easily recognizable and readily associated with commercial and institutional building types at mid-century. In addition to being identified with its typical stylistic treatment, curtain wall construction refers to the material itself, its manufacture, installation, and the construction methods with which it is associated (*Prudon, 2008:107*).

Separating the structural system of a building from its window wall was attractive to building designers and owners because it created more light on building interiors and allowed for more flexibility in the use of interior spaces. The larger glazed areas in curtain wall construction, which allowed for natural light in interior work spaces, was made possible by new methods of manufacturing glass and made practical by widespread use of air conditioning after the World War II. Improvements in sealants and insulation materials also made this form of design and construction practical.

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ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

The metal most commonly associated with mid-century curtain wall construction is aluminum, which replaced steel in the post-war era as the material of choice for this application. Aluminum framing for curtain wall construction was extruded and could, as a result, take on any cross sectional shape (*Kaskel, 1995:24*). Aluminum was readily available and inexpensive after World War II, as the output of the nation's aluminum plants was adapted to civilian purposes.

The use of exterior curtain walls also rationalized the construction process, leading to great efficiencies in building production. Whether the curtain wall was fabricated primarily on site or prefabricated in large panels, the metal components were produced at the factory, leading to labor savings on site. The material was also lighter than traditional masonry, allowing for easier handling and reduced shipping costs.

A number of materials were used for the spandrel panels under the windows, but the most popular were metal or glass. Glass panels were manufactured under the names Spandrelite and Vitrolux, and came in eight and sixteen colors respectively. Porcelain enamel on steel, which could also be manufactured in a numerous colors, was a popular material and finish for spandrel panels. Aluminum and stainless steel were also used.

As the post-war decades progressed, additional materials such as thin stone veneer, precast concrete, prefabricated brick masonry panels, as well as new generations of glazed products became popular, in addition to the glass, aluminum and brick veneer of the immediate post-war era (*Kelley, 1995:15*). The dark color and metallic surface of the aluminum panels for the Union Bank and Trust Company building, and the dark-colored anodized aluminum frame, seems to have been favored by corporate clients in the late 1950s through the 1960s

Architectural historian Leland Roth has noted that the post-war years became increasingly characterized by a desire for progress where 'the pluralism in the social sphere was countered by a singularity in architecture that became particularly rigid Pragmatic utilitarianism became the driving force in the United States And commercial architecture became an increasingly important form of public relations.' He makes the point that, while technical purity and universal forms might be admired for their abstract beauty in the hands of the most talented architects, in the hands of corporate America these same forms could be reductive. He also objects to the trend of the time for modern institutions to toward conformity, monotony and building as a form of corporate branding (*Roth, 1979:277*). While buildings have always been a point of pride for their owners, this building, while handsome, does appear to be a pragmatic response to the bank's expressed need for modernization.

Principal subcontractors will be: Heating, plumbing and air conditioning, Reber Plumbing and Heating Co.; brickwork, Albert D. Wardell Co.; ceramic tile, Ray Haines; excavation, Branning Bros.; glass and glazing, Hanley Paint and Glass Co.; millwork, Yuba Millwork Co., and painting, Western Painting Co., all of Helena.

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Photograph and ad showing Union Bank Weatherball, 1964

Source: http://www.lifelikecharm.com/buildings_of_note.htm

We're here to help you get what you want

Bank at the Sign of the Weatherball

UNION

BANK and TRUST COMPANY

Member Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

A black and white illustration of the Union Bank and Trust Company building. The building is a multi-story structure with a prominent weatherball sign on top. The sign is a large sphere with a cross inside, and it has the words "KELDER", "LIFE", "SHOW-RAM", and "CHART" written around it. The building is surrounded by a crowd of people.

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HISTORY OF PROPERTY

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Land use history. The lot on which Union Bank and Trust Company was eventually to be built was known as Hay Market Square in the late nineteenth century. It was, as the name implies, where hay was purchased from local farmers. It continued as a large open space, used for temporary events or parking, until the Union Bank and Trust building was constructed there in 1958. Prior to construction the building addressed as 350 and 352 N. Main Street (N. Last Chance Gulch today) was a small, two-unit shop front in the southwest corner of the lot that housed a variety of businesses over the years. The Union Bank and Trust building was constructed on the site in 1958. They were in business at this location until 1974, when Northwestern Bank first occupied the building; Northwestern Bank also sublet spaces to a variety of office tenants.

By 1983-84 the business was called Norwest. Norwest Capital Management and Trust Company and Norwest Bank occupied the Norwest Bank Building for the next seventeen years along with sub-tenants, including the Holter Museum Capital Campaign. In 1998 Norwest National Bank merged with Wells Fargo Bank. Norwest Bank is still listed as the property owner; Wells Fargo has occupied the building since 2000.

Union Bank and Trust Company. The Union Bank and Trust Company was founded by German immigrant Henry Elling. Elling immigrated to Montana in the 1860s from Missouri and worked in the clothing business in Virginia City until 1872, when he started Elling State Bank, which was still in business as late as 1900 (*Campbell, 1964:243*). He was also successful in other business ventures.

INFORMATION SOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

X See Additional Information Page

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In the late nineteenth century Helena's Merchants National Bank, which was founded in 1882 and had built an impressive edifice at E. Fuller and N. Main Street, failed. It was liquidated in the late 1890s, in the wake of the Panic of 1893 that cause the collapse or consolidation of many of Montana's (and the country's) banks. In 1898 Elling organized Union Bank with \$100,000 in capital and took over the Merchants Bank building (*Campbell, 1964:162*). They received permission from the receivers of Merchants National Bank to lease the building for four years, beginning with an annual rent of \$1,800. They also had an option to buy, however; their ensuing offer was to purchase the building for \$72,000 (*Campbell, 1964:167*). Union Bank opened for business on January 24, 1898.

Elling died in Virginia City in 1900, at the age of 58. At the time of his death, in addition to being president of Union Bank of Helena, he was also president of the First State Bank of Livingston, the Commercial National Bank of Bozeman, and the Carbon County Bank of Red Lodge. He left a wife and seven children. (*Campbell, 1964:243*).

Union Bank was not one of the 'big four' banks in Helena in the 1880s, which were the Merchants National Bank, First National Bank, Montana National Bank (later National Bank of Montana), and Second National Bank (*Campbell, 1957:1*). However, when it constructed its new building in 1958, it was considered Helena's oldest bank ("*Construction Is Started . . . 1958:1*"). The following historical narrative is from a display at Wells Fargo Bank today:

The Union Bank quickly became one of Helena's main banks, establishing a presence on Last Chance Gulch. In the 1930s it joined Northwestern National Bank's Bancorporation, formed in 1929 to bring financial stability to the region. In 1998, the renamed Norwest National Bank merged with Wells Fargo, bringing the legendary name back to Helena.

Development of 350 N. Last Chance Gulch. At the time it was constructing its new building, Union Bank and Trust Company was considered Helena's oldest bank ("*Construction Is Started . . . 1958:1*"). In 1957 Union Bank was issued demolition permits for the three buildings that were on the site at the time. They received a building permit on April 25, 1958 for a concrete building with dimensions of 145' by 70, 54' in height (likely the top of the penthouse), with three stories and a basement, and 10,000 square feet of space per floor, for a total of 42, 500 square feet of space. The building was to be clad in brick veneer and have a composition roof. The value of the construction was estimated at \$700,000 (*City of Helena building permits files*). The development was to encompass all of lots 9, 10, 11, 27, 28, 29, and parts of lots 8, 12, 23, 30 of Block 411 in the original Helena Townsite. The permit was issued to George Wattern of Lowe Construction Company. The architects were Orr Pickering and Associates of Billings, Montana.

Two stories and the basement were to be used by Union Bank, and the top story was to be rented out to various sub-tenants. The basement was to contain the vault, as it does today. The glass area on the front façade was estimated at 3,000 square feet of glass, was located "between columns of rose-gray tapestry brick above the street-floor facing of polished granite" ("*Construction Is Started . . . 1958:1*").

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HISTORY OF PROPERTY

A full description of the building uses, materials and furnishings, and sub-contractors can be seen in the newspaper article announcing the building's construction dated April 10, 1958 (see page 6). The anticipated atmosphere of the interiors was described as follows: ". . . The architects have woven an air of pleasant informality while retaining the security and dignity befitting a financial institution" ("*Construction Is Started . . . 1958:1*").

The reason cited by bank management for constructing the new building was that Union Bank and Trust had outgrown their previous structure, and that this one would provide "modern facilities and more efficient and convenient operations." They stated that, "This investment in the largest structure erected on Last Chance Gulch in a generation expresses the confidence of our officers and directors in the continued growth and prosperity of Helena and Montana."

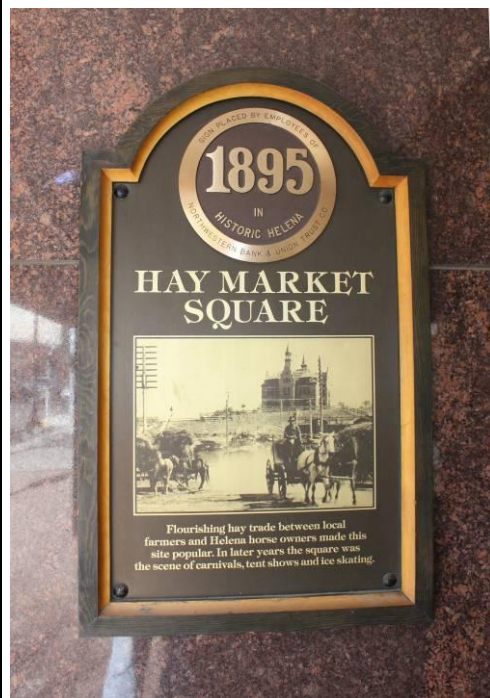
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Historic plaque at entry of Wells Fargo

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Merchants National Bank, later owned by Union Bank

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

NRHP Listing Date:

Evaluated Under Criterion C only – more research required for A, B, of D eligibility

NRHP Eligibility: ☒ Yes ☐ No ☒ Individually ☐ Contributing to Historic District ☐ Noncontributing to Historic District

NRHP Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Area of Significance: Period of Significance:

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

☐ See Additional Information Page

The Union Bank and Trust Company was in business in Helena from 1898 to 1974, this is the second building associated with the company, and Wells Fargo is now the third bank to have occupied this modern building. The building is significant as a long-standing banking institution in the city. While details, such as the weatherball motif, were lost once the building was taken over by the subsequent owner, when Union Bank and Trust built the building, it was part of a trend to modernize and update buildings and facilities, and represented a new generation of business for the bank. Today the building is occupied by a national bank, Wells Fargo, that has been in Helena for over 110 years. Though corporate appearance, the building retains a significant association with the development of Helena's downtown through the mid-twentieth century.

The Union Bank and Trust Company building is a handsome building and would have appeared a very modern addition to the Last Chance Gulch (or Main Street) streetscape in 1958. It is a curtain wall office building, embodying many of the features of this style and method of construction favored by corporate clients at this time. While not overly distinctive, building is representative of the genre of mid-century curtain wall construction (Criterion C). No building features extend beyond a straightforward adaptation of a two-dimensional composition and almost monochromatic use of materials that can characterizes the style.

Detailing is also straightforward, and does not enhance the building's features or surfaces. However, it is a good example of mid-century corporate style and of curtain wall construction and is largely intact. Further, it appears that the building was individualized in its interiors, where it still has a display of gold and a Rudy Autio mural, as well as sculpture and an exhibit of local history. The building reviewer, writing for *The Independent Record* in 1958, noted that, "... the architects have woven an air of pleasant informality while retaining the security and dignity befitting a financial institution." This appears to be an apt description.

INTEGRITY

☐ See Additional Information Page

The integrity of the building is good. It retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

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Description: **Front (east) façade, November 3, 2009; viewed from southeast**



Description: **Front (east) and north side façade, November 3, 2009; viewed from northeast**

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

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Description: **North side façade and rear (west) façade, November 3, 2009; viewed from northwest**



Description: **North side façade, November 3, 2009; viewed from north**

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

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Description: **Rear (west) façade, November 3, 2009; viewed from southwest**



Description: **Detail, front entry (east façade), November 3, 2009; viewed from southeast**

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

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Description: **Detail, Rudy Autio mural on first floor, November 3, 2009**

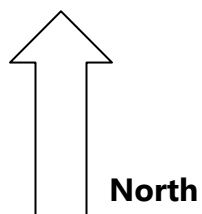
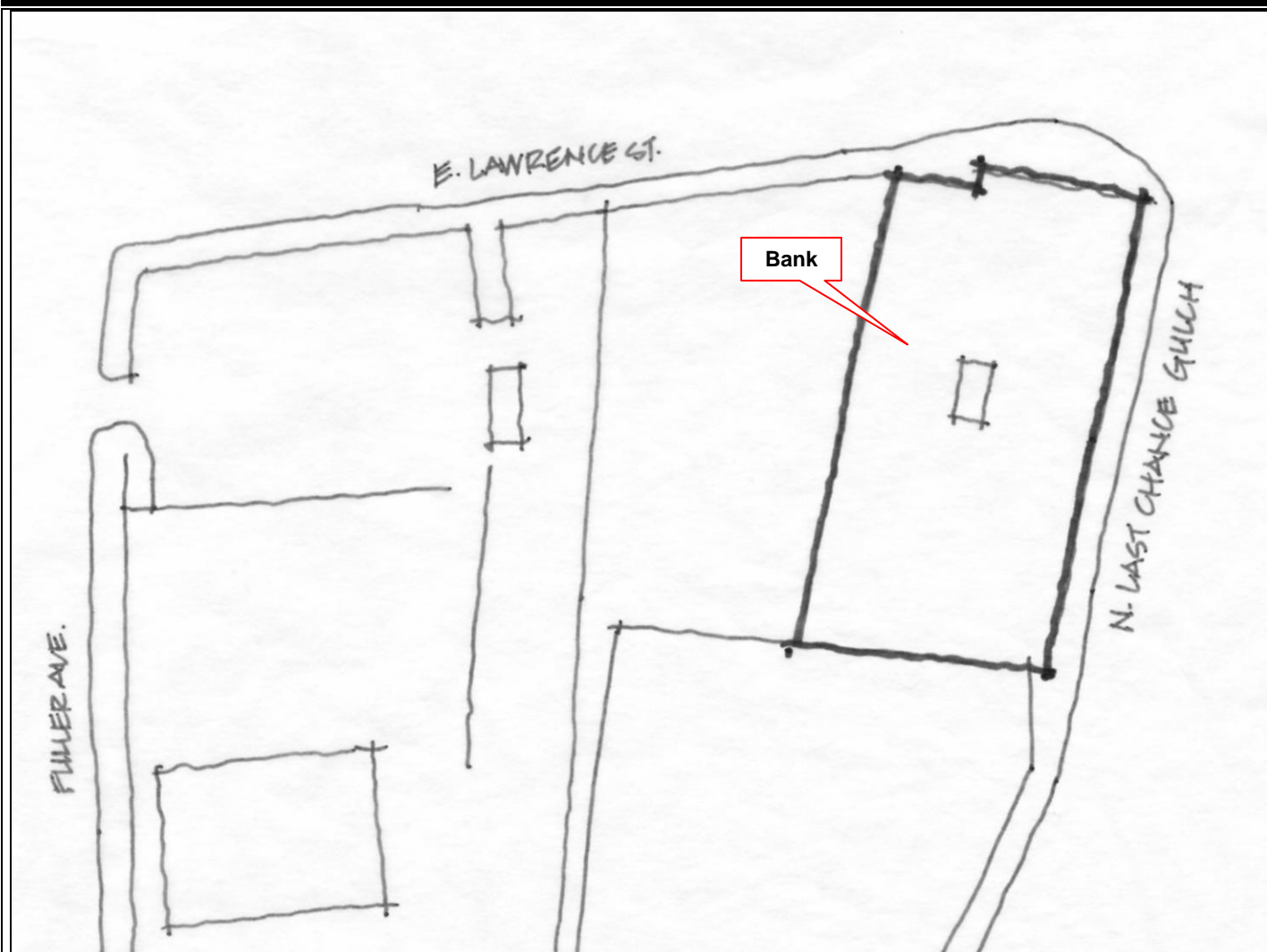


Description: **Wells Fargo history display on first floor, November 3, 2009**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
SITE MAP

Property Name: **350 N. Last Chance Gulch**

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MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

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